

The Attack on Hatchet Wood – Battle of Amiens, August 1918

By Richard Laughton



Lt. G. V. Laughton, M.C.

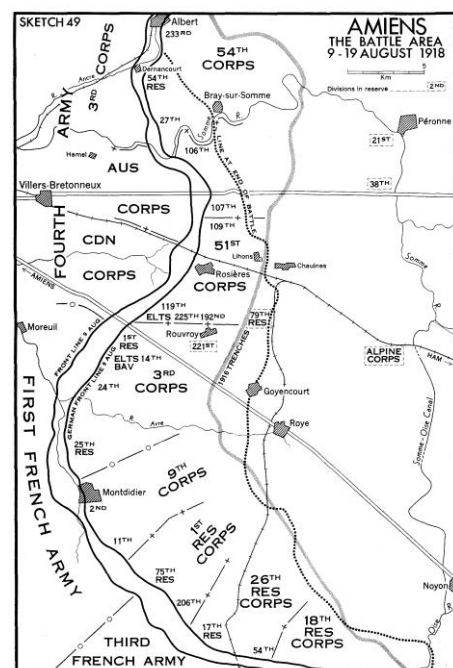
Trench warfare on the Western Front changed drastically – and forever – when General Ludendorff (*Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Von Hindenburg*) initiated “*Operation Michael*” in March of 1918. The intent of the German offensive was to split the British and French forces, and although initially successful, it became the downfall of the German Empire – as it opened the way for allied open warfare. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) was to become a key component of this new war, in what is now shown in history as “*Canada’s Hundred Days*” – the fast paced movement of the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons. This is the story of “*Attack on Hatchet Wood*”, just one of the skirmishes in the Battle of Amiens – all taking place on the 1st and 2nd day of the battle.

Nicholson ¹ reports that in July 1918 the CEF was serving in reserve to the *British First Army*. With the announcement of the planned Amiens offensive on July 20th, the Canadian Corps would move to the area with the *British Fourth Army*, all in a cloak of secrecy. Movement was restricted to darkness, wireless stations were closed until the start of the offensive (*Zero Hour*), and reconnaissance of the enemy was rigidly restricted. CEF activity was maintained in the vicinity of Arras (near Vimy Ridge), so as to suggest the Canadians were still planning a local attack.

Taking a step back in time from the initiation of the *Battle of Amiens* we can see how all of the events were well coordinated with all of the Allied Forces (*Canadian, Australian, British and French*). When Ludendorff’s of March 1918 “*Operation Michael*” showed signs of failure the allies grouped and planned the breakthrough offensive.

On July 30th 1918 the Canadian Corps began the highly secretive move by bus and train from Arras to Amiens. By night, during the first week of August, the troops marched out to their battle assembly positions. The battle positions were now set, with the *First French Army* to the South and the *Fourth British Army* to the north. The British Fourth Army group consisted of the *Canadian Corps*, to the north of the French, then the *Australian Corps* and the *British 3^d Corp*.

Opposing the Allies was the *German Second Army* to the north, opposing the *British Fourth Army* and the *German Eighteenth Army* on the south, primarily opposing the French. The balance sheet showed 21 allied divisions against 14 German divisions. The German forces were also outnumbered in terms of field guns, tanks and aeroplanes.



Nicholson ¹ Sketch 49

The *Battle of Amiens* was not anticipated to be a single battle for the sole purpose of protecting the City of Amiens, rather one that for the first time, would place allied forces in the situation that they would be a highly mobile force, free from the encapsulation of the trenches and ready to roll across the German held areas of France. The combined units of Canadian artillery, cavalry, tank corps and infantry would be brought to bear on the collapsing Axis forces. In the particular case of Canada, the German Army would soon experience the combined action of all four Canadian Divisions of the Army Corps and supporting Troops. As General Ludendorff described, this would be “*the black day of the German Army*”.

Detailed accounts of the integrated action of the Canadian Corps are provided by Livesay ² in his thorough account of “*Canada’s Hundred Days*” from Amiens to Mons. The *creeping artillery barrage* opened August 8th 1918 at 4:20 am, which caught the enemy completely by surprise. The enemy began to retreat, followed closely by the whippet tanks and by 8 a.m. even the Cavalry was on the scene.

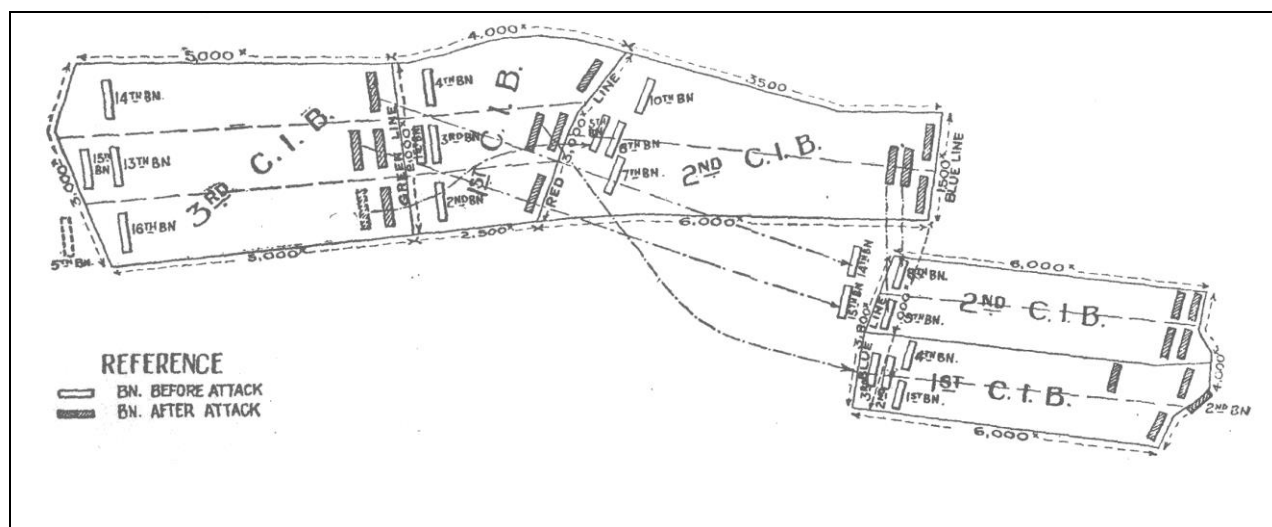
Cook ³ refers to this as the time that “*The Empire Strikes Back*”, with the allies ready to blast forward against a German force that had already suffered 800,000 casualties in the spring and summer of 1918. The Canadians were fresh and well trained in the concept of open warfare, after a relatively quiet spring. They were ready to push forward. Amiens, an important railway junction between Paris and Boulogne had to be secured, one that had nearly been captured by the Germans in the previous offensive.

The objective of August 8th, as described by General Currie ² was “*to push forward in the direction of the line Royes-Chaulnes with the least possible delay, thrusting the enemy back in the general direction of Ham, and so facilitating the operations of the French on the front between Montdidier and Noyon*”. Currie’s battle front extended 8,500 yards in a straight line from south of Hourages to east of Viller-Bretoneux. The 3rd Canadian Division held the right, the 1st Canadian Division the centre with the 2nd Canadian Division the left. The 4th Canadian Division was in reserve behind the 3rd Division, ready to move forward as soon as the signal was given.

By the end of the first day of the Battle of Amiens, the Canadian Corp was to pass through the *Green Line* (Harmon Wood to Mercelave), the *Red Line* (Mézières to Guillaucourt) and the *Blue Line* at the “*Outer Amiens Defence Line*” (Hangest-en-Santerre to Harbonnières). The Cavalry was to exploit beyond this final line if at all possible - a task for which they were well trained and ready. Tanks were to assist the infantry by taking out machine gun defences at the *Red Line*. The *Canadian Independent Force* would support the right flank of the 3rd Canadian Division, which would hold at the *Red Line*, so as to allow the 4th Canadian Division to pass through. Livesay ² reports that the complete and overwhelming surprise of the action allowed the Canadian Corp to achieve all but a small fraction of the days’ objectives. All four Canadian Divisions faced battle on August 8th 1918 penetrating some 16,000 yards to east of Caix – a record for any action on the Western Front. Nicholson ¹ reports the cost of this action for the Canadian Corp as 1,036 killed and 2,803 wounded, with 29 taken prisoner. The opposing German forces were reported to have been nearly completely annihilated, for which Ludendorff recorded “*August 8th was the black day of the German Army in the history of this war – German morale had been struck an irreparable blow – Everything I had feared and of which I had so often given warning*”.

Cook ³ reports that Le Quesnel was the only planned objective for August 8th that did not fall and that the Germans were fully prepared to defend their lines on August 9th. Historians report in various forms that after August 8th the German army was “*bent or shaken*” but not “*broken or shattered*”. All four Canadian Divisions would be called upon to take up arms again on August 9th; however the artillery had not kept up with the rapidly advancing infantry and was of little value on the that day. Delays were inevitable and the troops were exhausted. Open warfare was in progress and it was costly to the Canadian Corps. In addition to the problems the 2nd Infantry Brigade faced at Hatchet Wood, the 6th Infantry Brigade faced 40 Maxim machine guns in their dash across 1,000 metres of open ground and the 5th Brigade faced the enemy firing machine guns and field guns “*at point blank*”. In addition, the artillery fell behind and medical and supply services could not keep up with the rapidly advancing battalions. The Canadian Corp was suffering from its own great success.

Christie ⁴ tells us on the 3rd Division’s front, assisted by tanks; the Germans were totally caught by surprise. Not to be forgotten, the *Canadian Independent Force* (working between the Canadian Corp and the French Army to the south), exercised its mobility to quickly advance along the Amiens-Roye Road. Christie notes that “the 1st Division’s attack was so successful and so quick even German artillery was captured in place. Details of the placement of the individual Brigades of the 1st Division are provided by Christie, which assist in identifying where the 2nd Brigade was located at the end of August 8th, prior to the attack on Hatchet Wood on August 9th.



Christie ⁴ *Diagram Showing Employment of 1st Canadian Division, August 8 1919*

Note the reference to the “Blue Line” (*Outer Amiens Defence Line*) in Christie’s sketch that extended just west of Hangest-en-Santerre on the south and Harbonnières to the north. This depicts the southward move of the 2nd Infantry Brigade to place it directly in the path of Hatchet Wood on the morning of August 9th 1918.

As always, the memoirs and diaries of Sir General Haig (*British Commander*) and Sir Arthur Currie (*Canadian Commander*) differ in their interpretation of the importance of the events and the results that were achieved. To Haig the Canadians were a mere colonial Corp and as such the British Army always took full credit for Canadian success stories.

Extracts of the War Diary and Letters of Sir General Haig by Sheffield and Bourne ⁵
report on the opening of the Battle of Amiens:

Thursday 8 August

The Battle of Amiens was the BEF's greatest victory of the war. Famously, Ludendorff described it as "the black day of the German army".

7 am Fourth Army reported "Generally quiet night until zero, 4.20 am. We attacked from southern boundary (south of Domart en Luce) to Morlancourt (near Ancre) in conjunction with French on right. Attack apparently complete surprise and is progressing satisfactorily."

Everywhere else the situation had developed more favourably for us than we had dared even to hope! The Enemy were completely surprised, 2 reliefs of divisions were in progress, very little resistance was offered, and our troops got their objectives quickly with very little loss!

Enemy blowing up dumps in all directions and streaming eastwards. Their transport and limbers offer splendid targets for our airoplanes.

(In his letter to Lady Haig on August 8, 1918)

Our attack started at 4.20 this morning and seems to have taken the enemy completely by surprise ... I hear. Two of our armoured motor cars being sent on to round up German Corps Headquarters! Who would have believed this possible even 2 months ago? How much easier it is to attack, than to stand and await an enemy's attack!

Friday 9 August

Attack was renewed on our whole front south of the Somme, Canadians at 10 am — Australians at 11. The III Corps did not attack till 4 pm.

Good progress was made, in spite of increased opposition. Canadians took Bouchoir—Folies, Beaufort—Warvillers—Vrely—Rouvroy—Meharicourt—Rosieres. Australians captured Vauvillers—Framerville.

By dark III Corps had taken Morlancourt and Chipilly, and advanced their line to the high ground from west of Etinehem to Dernancourt on Ancre. This relieved me of all anxiety for our left flank. The French met with no opposition owing to the determined advance of the British in front of their left, [having cut in on the Enemy's communications.]

Humphries ⁵ selected papers of Sir Arthur Currie's diaries, letters and reports to the Ministry provide entries from July 30th to August 7th 1918 and then again on August 13th, after the main attacks of the Battle of Amiens. He penned a *Special Order* on August 13th 1918 that summarizes the events of the battle:

Special Order by Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, 13 August 1918

The first stage of this Battle of Amiens and one of the most successful operations conducted by the Allied armies since the war began is now a matter of history.

The Canadian Corps has every right to feel more than proud of the part it played. To move the Corps from the Arras front and in less than a week launch into in battle so many miles distant was in itself a splendid performance. Yet the splendour of that performance pales into insignificance when compared with what has been accomplished since zero hour on August 8th.

On that date the Canadian Corps—to which was attached the 3rd Cavalry Division, the 4th Tank Brigade, the 5th Squadron RAF—attacked on a front of 7,500 yards. After a penetration of 25,000 yards the line tonight rests on a 10,000 yard frontage. Sixteen German divisions have been identified, of which four have been completely routed. Nearly 150 guns have been captured, while over one thousand machine guns have fallen into our hands. Ten thousand prisoners have

passed through our cages and casualty clearing stations, a number greatly in excess of our total casualties. Twenty-five towns and villages have been rescued from the clutch of the invaders, and the danger of dividing the French and British Army has been dissipated.

Canada has always placed the most implicit confidence in her Army. How nobly has that confidence been justified: and with what pride has the story of your gallant success been read in the home land! This magnificent victory has been won because your training was good, your discipline was good, your leadership was good. Given these three, success must always come.

The remainder of the special order, not quoted above, was his thanks to all the units that participated in the battle.

Also contained in Humphries⁶ work are the details of Currie's *Interim Report* for actions in 1918. Unlike the reports provided singly in the war diaries, Currie's comments tie all of the actions of the Canadian Corps together:

At 4:20 am, August 8, the initial assault was delivered on the entire army front of attack, and the First French Army opened their bombardment. The attack made satisfactory progress from the outset on the whole front. East of Hourges, opposite the 3rd Canadian Division, the high ground which dominated our front and a portion of the French front had been seized quickly by the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier General E. M. Ormond), and the way was opened for the Canadian Independent Force and the 4th Canadian Division.

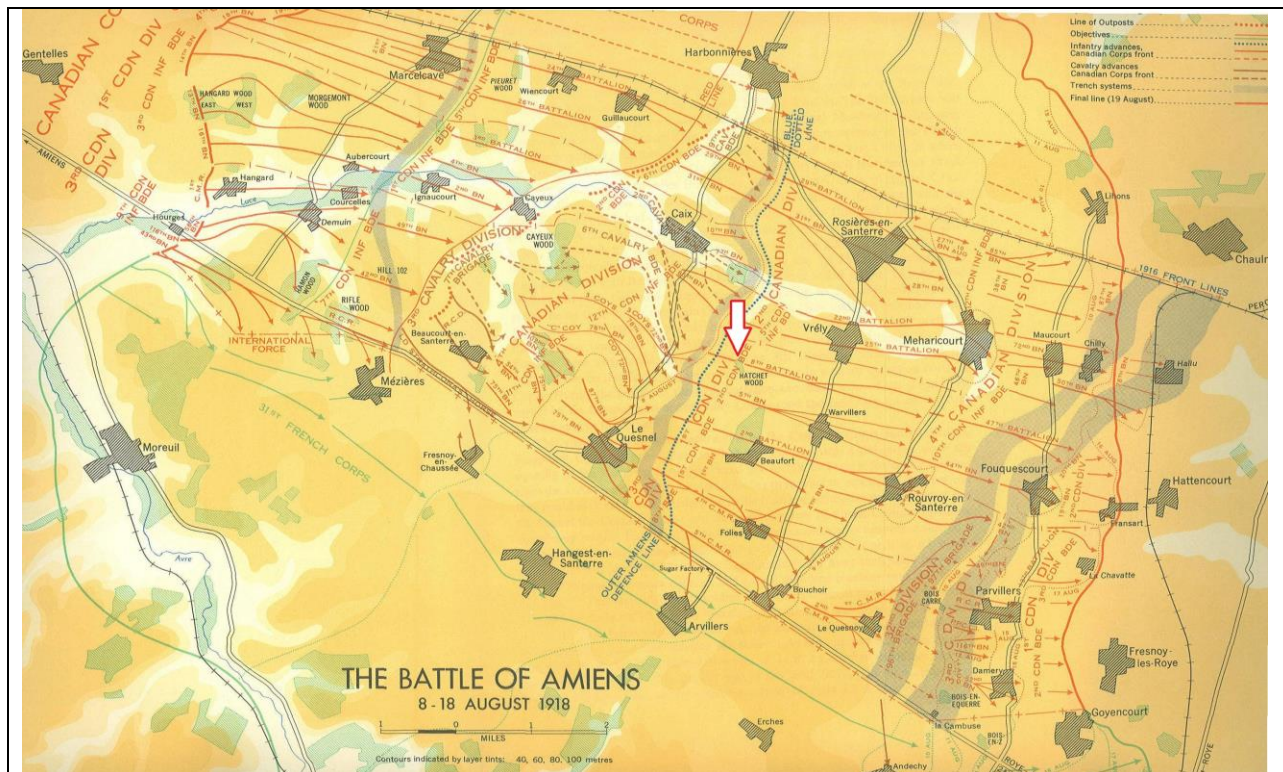
The very complete arrangements made by the 3rd Canadian division to keep the bridge open, and to repair the road quickly, allowed the reserves to go forward without delay. The heavy task of the engineers was remarkably well carried out. By the afternoon the Canadian Corps had gained all its objectives, with the exception of a few hundred yards on the right in the vicinity of Le Quesnel, where stiff resistance was offered by unexpected reserves, but this was made good the following morning. The day's operations, in which the four Canadian divisions took part, represented a maximum penetration of the enemy's defences of over eight miles, and included the capture of the following villages: Hangard, Demuin, Beaucourt, Aubercourt, Courcelles, Ignaucourt, Cayeux, Caix, Marcelcave, Wiencourt-l'Equipee, and Guillaucourt. In addition to these, the Canadian Independent Force assisted the French in the capture of Mézières, which was holding up their advance.

The surprise had been complete and overwhelming. The prisoners stated that they had no idea that an attack was impending, and captured documents did not indicate that any of our preparations had been detected. The noise of our tanks going to the final position of assembly had been heard by some men and reported, but no deduction appears to have been made regarding this. An officer stated that the Canadians were believed to be on the Kemmel front.

On the following day, the 9th, the advance was continued with the 3rd, 1st, and 2nd Canadian Divisions in the line, the 4th Canadian Division being held in corps reserve. Substantial progress was made, and by evening the average depth of our advance was about four miles, with a maximum of six miles at some points. The following additional villages were captured: Le Quesnel, Folies, Bouchoir, Beaufort, Warvillers, Rouvroy, Vrely, Meharicourt, and Rosières.

The infantry and tanks of the 3rd Canadian Division and the Canadian Independent Force co-operated with the French in the capture of Arvillers. During the day the enemy's resistance stiffened considerably, and whatever gains were made resulted from heavy infantry fighting against fresh troops, with only a few tanks available for support. This advance had brought our troops into the area of the trenches and defences occupied prior to the Somme operations in 1916. These trenches, while not in a good state of repair, were, nevertheless, protected by a considerable amount of wire, and lent themselves readily to a very stubborn machine gun defence.

The movement of the Canadian Corps from August 8-18, 1918 is clearly illustrated by Map 11 of the Nicholson ¹ collection, which depicts the action from the base at Gentelles past the 1916 front lines at Fouquescourt. In this map, *Hatchet Wood* is clearly shown just past the “*Outer Amiens Defence Line*” – a marking which is frequently referenced in the battalion and brigade war diaries. These woods lay just beyond the objective of the 1st Canadian Division for August 8, 1918 and would be dealt with on the following day. Nicholson reports that the action on August 9th was delayed by more than 5 hours, giving the enemy time to bolster his resistance, with zero hour now set for 10 a.m. The 3rd Canadian Division faced resistance from machine guns at Le Quesnel and the woods beyond, action that would soon be mirrored in the action of the 1st Division in the centre of the attack near Hatchet Wood.



Nicholson 1962 Map 11 (*Hatchet Wood* marked as )

It was here that Nicholson reports that the 8th Battalion (2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1st Canadian Division) “*met its most serious resistance from machine guns firing out of Hatchet Wood and a small copse beyond*”. In this action Corporal F. C. Coppins and Lance Corporal A. P. Brereton would each win the Victoria Cross for their gallant action in silencing a number of these guns. With the wood cleared, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade was able to move into Warvillers with little resistance and on to the Meharicourt to Rouvry-en-Santerre road, with tank and cavalry support. The Canadian Corps had penetrated another 4 miles into the German defences, at a cost of 2,574 casualties (killed and wounded). Panic spread through the German populace as reports came back that “*the enemy had broken in south of the Somme on a broad front*”. Although fighting would continue for another week, the progress was more or less checked by August 13, 1918. The Canadian Corps moved out of the area on August 19th and 20th to continue the next phase of the battle.

The “*Attack on Hatchet Wood*” was a very small part of the overall actions on the first two days of the *Battle of Amiens*, but it marked one of the historic turning points in the success of “*Canada’s Hundred Days*”. The success of this attack was based on the men that formed the companies (Coys – A, B, C, D) of the 8th Infantry Battalion, many of which are recorded in history for their valour. The 8th *Infantry Battalion* was one the primary components of the 2nd *Canadian Infantry Brigade*, itself a component of the 1st *Canadian Division*, all part of the Canadian Corp. Livesay ² clarifies that the *Canadian Corp* is not the same as the *Canadian Forces* or the *Canadian Army* as the average citizen thinks. Livesay describes the *Corp* (an abbreviation for the term “*Army Corps*”) as a “*very uncertain and indefinite military term*” and “*consisting of a Headquarters, from two to six Divisions, and a varying number of Corps Troops composed of all arms*”. Division and Corps Troops are frequently transferred from corps to corps. It was not uncommon for the Canadian Corp to move from one British Army unit to another, as the needs of the battles dictated.

The details of the events that led to the *Attack on Hatchet Wood* are summarized in the primary historical references prepared by Livesay ², Nicholson ¹, and most recently Cook ³. Key extracts of each of these references are summarized in historical order as follows:

Livesay (1919, pg. 54)

The 2nd Brigade was able to make rapid progress in the early stage of the attack, outstripping the troops on its right by the time Warvillers was reached. This village and the woods immediately to the south of it were captured by the aid of tanks with but little difficulty. But on the extreme right in the early stage of the attack, serious resistance was encountered, coming from a nest of machine-guns in Hatchett Wood. The 2nd Brigade attacked with the 5th Battalion, Saskatchewan, and the 8th. Battalion, of Winnipeg, and there came up in support two battalions of the 3^d Brigade, the 15th recruited from the 48th Highlanders of Toronto, and the 14th, Royal Montreal Regiment.

The intensive fighting on this front was fruitful of many individual deeds of gallantry. Thus, when his platoon came unexpectedly under fire of numerous machine-guns, Acting-Sergeant George Frederick Coppins of the 8th Battalion, a native of London, England, finding that it was not possible to advance nor retire, and when, no cover being available, it was apparent that the platoon must be annihilated unless the machine-guns were at once silenced, called for four volunteers to follow him and leapt forward in the face of intense machine-gun fire. With his comrades he rushed straight for the machine guns. The four men with him were killed and Cpl. Coppins wounded. Despite his wounds he reached the hostile machine-guns alone, killed the operator of the first gun and three of the crew, and made prisoners four others.

Nicholson (1962, pg. 412)

The 1st Division reached its reduced objectives without much difficulty. The 2nd Brigade, operating on the 5th Brigade's right, had to side-step 2500 yards to the south before jumping off. It advanced largely unsupported by either tanks or artillery. The 8th Battalion met its most serious resistance from machine-guns firing out of Hatchet Wood and small copses beyond. On its right, the 5th Battalion found the ground, which was very flat, and masked with growing crops, well suited to section rushes covered by machine-gun fire. During the day's advance the Victoria Cross was won by three gallant non-commissioned officers of the brigade—Sergeant R. L. Zengel, M.M., of the 5th Battalion, and Corporal F. C. Coppins and Lance-Corporal Alexander Brereton of the 8th. In earning this high award each man at great personal risk boldly attacked and silenced one or more German machine-gun posts, thereby saving his comrades from heavy casualties. The village of Warvillers in the right of the brigade sector was occupied without much opposition, and as the assaulting battalions neared the Meharicourt-Rouvroy road shortly before

dusk, they received valuable if belated assistance from tanks of the 4th Tank Battalion, and from whippets on loan from the 1st Cavalry Division.

Cook (2008, pg. 444)

Macdonell's 1st and 2nd Brigades attacked to the south, with four battalions in the first phase, and despite being poorly supported by the artillery and having almost no tanks, they mirrored the success of the 2nd Division to the north, The fierce resistance of dozens of machine-gunners prolonged the battle throughout the day, but all were gradually knocked out. Sergeant R. L. Zengel of the 5th Battalion and Corporal F. C. Coppins and Lance Corporal Alexander Brereton, both of the 8th Battalion, were awarded Victoria Crosses for their work in single-handedly knocking out enemy machine-gun nests. In Coppins' case, the corporal was leading his platoon when it was caught in the open in a machine-gun ambush. Thousands of bullets whizzed around the soldiers, with the tall grass affording little cover. In an act of desperate heroism, Coppins grabbed four men and they charged the machine guns; the four were killed, and Coppins was wounded, but he got close enough to knock one out and allow his platoon to find some dead ground. From there, they slowly manoeuvred around to destroy the remaining gun crews. His duty done, and suffering from a wound, Coppins could have been sent to the rear, but he kept leading his men to their final objectives. Similar incredible acts of bravery were carried out all along the front, making the difference between defeat and victory.

For the most complete details of the actions of the CEF during the Great War, there is no better place to turn than the on-line war diaries of *the Divisions, Brigades and Battalions* of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. These are the reports written on those days by those men that relate to the specific actions. Nothing can tell the story better than the war diary extracts. For the purpose of this review we take you first to the diaries of the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion: (Library and Archives Canada ⁷)

8th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Appendix 5 Narrative 2)

At 1.00 p.m. the 2nd in Command left Headquarters to keep in touch with the situation. The 2nd Division were seen to be advancing on our left - troops were seen to be advancing on our right, though slightly in rear of us. From the very outset fighting commenced. The 4th Division had advised that they hold the northerly portion of the Amiens Defence system in the line of our advance, but this appeared to be wrong, as we captured and killed several Germans here. In the south part of the Amiens Defence System on our front a Machine Gun nest was known to exist. Our Battery of Field Guns had according to our Barrage table played on this for five minutes, and we had little difficulty in overcoming it, but upon capturing it, Machine Gun fire from more distant positions become terribly severe on this half of our Front.

"B" Coy, on our left advanced successfully though with heavy casualties in the Wood at E.23.d.

"C" Coy advanced, engaging small parties of the enemy, until held up by Machine Gun fire in E.22.d. The Wood in E.23.c. had to be cut off. We had no Tanks - our only Support was one Battery of Field Artillery, and this on a 900 yards Front. A Schedule had been laid down for all the Battery could contend with.

By working their way gradually forward "D" Coy finally managed to gain entry at the N.E. corner, of the Wood. In the meantime "B" Coy had pushed on till about E.23.11. The German machine gunners stuck to their machines stoutly, but upon entry into the Wood being effected the enemy surrendered very freely, and about 300 prisoners or more were captured and a great number of machine guns. The men had been dribbled forward North of the Wood - Tanks had advanced along the North edge of BEAUFORT WOOD- German Artillery fire had been severe, and although Officers and N.C.Os took clever advantage of Draws in the ground, severe casualties had been unavoidable.

With the capture of this **HATCHET WOOD** (as named by Major Raddall), however, the advance of "C" and "A" ceps. was made possible, and opposition for the next few hundred yards was less severe. At about this time Major Raddall, Commanding the Battalion, was killed by a Machine Gun bullet whilst following the Battalion. Word was immediately passed to the 2nd in Command to take over, and he then ordered Battalion Headquarters to move forward to the N.E. corner of **HATCHET WOOD**, when the Battalion had reached the Cross roads in E.23.d. Here again the Battalion encountered serious Opposition from the Wood. in E.24.c. Again enveloping tactics were employed- no outside support was available. By clever work on the part of Officers and N.C.Os. and stout determination of the men, the Wood was surrounded and captured.

Whereas the war diary appendices are plain typed text and do not exhibit the *feel of the era*, the daily war diaries are prepared on specific forms and are often hand written. At times you can almost imagine the Adjutant sitting in the unit's HQ scribbling or typing away amidst the sounds and smell of the war above (or beyond). Here, for example, are the pages from the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigades war diary for August 8th and 9th, 1918 (Library and Archives Canada ⁸).

2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade

From the daily reports of the August 1918 war dairy:

WAR DIARY or INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY (Brace heading not required.)			Army Form C. 2118.
Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information
BATTLE OF AMIENS	August 8th 1918		Weather: Fine, bright, with heavy ground mists during early morning. Brigade Headquarters: T.10.d.2.1. DEMOIN 1/20,000 In accordance with general plan the barrage opened promptly at 4.20 a.m., 3rd Brigade leading the assault for the 1st Canadian Division. The 1st Brigade reached the GREEN LINE at ZERO plus 4 hours and passed through to their objective - the RED LINE - reaching same at ZERO plus 5 hours. The 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade then passed through them to exploit their success, the 7th Battalion attacking on the right, and the 10th on the left, and at 2.50 p.m. 10th Battalion reported all objectives gained. Casualties: 5th C.I.Bn. MAJOR A.MADDEN, Lieut. W.SCAIFE, wounded 7th C.I.Bn. Lieut. G.A.JACKSON, wounded 10th C.I.Bn. Capt. E.R.MILES, Lieut. E.VOSSE, wounded. NOTE: O.R. casualties included in those shown for Aug. 10th. Reinforcements: 8th C.I.Bn. 45 O.R. APPENDIX No.15 NARRATIVE of BATTLE OF AMIENS
	August 9th 1918		Weather: Fine, bright, with heavy ground mist during early morning. During the night Operation Order No. 273 was received stating that 2nd Canadian Division would attack through the line now held by the 1st Canadian Division in front of CAIX, and that the 2nd Brigade would sideslip to the south and attack over front at present held by the 4th Canadian Division, the objective being main road from ROUVROY to MEHARICOURT. At 3.00 a.m. a conference of Commanding Officers was held, at which it was decided the 5th and 8th Battalions would make the attack, with the 7th and 10th Battalions in support and reserve. This was subsequently changed, and the 15th Battalion was placed in support to the 5th, and the 14th Battalion in support to the 8th. One Company of Tanks was detailed to co-operate with the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade. ZERO hour was fixed for 10.00 a.m. on the 9th inst. but was changed to 1.00 p.m. in order to get the Divisions on our flanks into position for attack. Whilst leading the assault on HATCHET WOOD, Officer Commanding 8th Battalion,

Extract of 2nd Brigade Daily War Diary ⁸ of August 9, 1918

August 9th 1918: During the night Operation Order No. 273 was received stating that the 2nd Canadian Division would attack through the line now held by the 1st Canadian Division in from of CAIX, and that the 2nd Brigade would sideslip to the south and attack over front at present held by the 4th Canadian Division, the objective being the main road for ROUVROY to MEHARICOURT.

... it was decided the 5th and 8th Battalions would make the attack, with the 7th and 10th Battalions in support and reserve ... subsequently changed and the 15th Battalion was placed in support to the 5th, and the 14th Battalion in support of the 8th ...

Whilst leading the assault on **HATCHET WOOD**, Officer Commanding 8th Battalion MAJOR T. H. RADDALL was killed.

The details of plans, orders and battle reports are generally laid out in the appendices to each monthly war diary. There is a common approach to each of these, however they do vary depending on the author – but guidelines were obviously in place. Many go so far as to end with a section on “Lessons Learned”, so that the knowledge is passed on to the next Commanding Officer, perhaps even in the next war.

At 12 noon, the news arrived that zero hour would be at 1.00 p.m. and by 12.30 pm, the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion had reported that they were in supporting positions and prepared to carry on at ZERO hour. At 12.45 p.m. Major J. K. L. Pyman of the 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion called with the information that the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade were not up on the right of his battalion,

At 1.00 p.m. (ZERO HOUR) the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade jumped off, and serious fighting continued from the outset.

The 8th Canadian Battalion immediately came under hostile machine gun fire. The positions of these guns were captured, but immediately after this, intense machine gun fire developed from distant positions. The left Company (“B” Company) of the 8th Canadian Battalion successfully advanced through this hail of bullets, and their gallantry and speed saved them from suffering casualties even heavier than those they sustained. From the wood 1,000 yards north of Beaufort came a devastating fire which killed and wounded many of this company. All of the Officers with the exception of Lieutenant D. B. Bullen became casualties. Lieutenant Bullen, taking command of the Company led them forward to their final objective in a gallant and resourceful manner. “C” Company of the 8th Canadian Battalion, on their right, had also met with numerous detached machine gun emplacements, which they cleaned up. They suffered seriously from heavy machine gun fire from the wood north of Beaufort, and were temporarily held up. The key to the advance at this period lay in the wood just to the East of this; there was one course, and one course only, open to the Commanding Officer – to cut off and carry this wood.

This was a matter of great difficulty. The 8th Canadian Battalion had no tanks on which to call for assistance, their only artillery support was from the 6th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, which had the enormous frontage of 900 yards to look after. By the most desperate fighting “D” Company gallantly worked its way forward and finally managed to gain entry into the North-east corner of the wood.

19.

Officer accordingly notified the G.O.C. of the situation and awaited further instructions with reference to the alteration of ZERO Hour. Meanwhile, slight re-adjustments were made by the 2nd-in-Command as to the assembly of the Companies and these were carried out.

At 12 noon, the news arrived that Zero hour would be 1.00 p.m. and by 12.30 p.m., the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion had reported that they were in supporting positions and prepared to carry on at ZERO Hour. At 12.45 p.m. Major J.K.L. PYMAN of the 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion called with the information that the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade were not up on the right of his Battalion.

At 1.00 p.m. (ZERO HOUR) the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade jumped off, and serious fighting commenced from the outset.

The 8th Canadian Battalion immediately came under hostile machine gun fire. The positions of these guns were captured, but immediately after this, intense machine gun fire developed from some distant positions. The left Company (“B” Company) of the 8th Canadian Battalion successfully advanced through this hail of bullets, and their gallantry and speed saved them from suffering casualties even heavier than those they sustained. From the wood 1,000 yards North of BEAUFORT came a devastating fire which killed and wounded many of this Company. All of the Officers with the exception of Lieutenant D.B. BULLEN became casualties. Lieutenant Bullen taking command of the Company led them forward to their final objective in a gallant and resourceful manner. “C” Company of the 8th Canadian Battalion, on their right, had also met with numerous detached machine gun emplacements, which they cleaned up. They suffered seriously from heavy machine gun fire from the wood North of BEAUFORT, and were temporarily held up. The key to the advance at this period lay in the wood just to the East of this; there was one course, and one course only, open to the Commanding Officer, namely – to cut off and carry this wood.

This was a matter of great difficulty. The 8th Canadian Battalion had no tanks on which to call for assistance, their only Artillery support was from the 6th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, who had the enormous frontage of 900 yards to look after. By the most desperate fighting “B” Company gallantly worked its way forward and finally managed to gain entry into the North-east corner of the wood.

“B” Company had, meanwhile, pushed on until approximately, a point 200 yards North-east of HATCHET WOOD was gained, and though the machine gunners and other enemy elements put up a very stout defence until the last moment, they surrendered on the entry of the wood being effected, and a large number of machine guns and about 300 prisoners were captured.

“B” Company had meanwhile, pushed on until approximately, a point 200 yards north-east of **HATCHET WOOD** was gained, and though the machine gunners and other enemy elements put up a very stout defence until the last moment, they surrendered on the entry of the wood being effected, and **a large number of machine guns and about 300 prisoners were captured.**

Source:
April 1918 2nd Brigade War Diary ⁸
Library and Archives Canada

Tanks had by now advanced along the Northern edge of BEAUFORT WOOD, and the men were pressing forward by means of the process of infiltration. Hostile Artillery fire had been very severe, and although the best advantage had been taken of all the folds in the ground severe casualties had been unavoidable. The second Wood, which had given so much trouble, had been named **HATCHET WOOD** by Major T. H. Raddall, D.S.O. on account of its appearance on the map. During the attack on this wood, many notable instances of valour had occurred. The action of Corporal F. G. Coppins was one of the most noticeable. Corporal Coppin's Platoon came unexpectedly into the zone of fire of numerous machine guns in HATCHET WOOD. They were unable to advance or retire as they were badly exposed on an open forward slope, and there was no available cover, the situation required prompt and immediate action. Corporal Coppins at once appreciated the situation. Without a moment's hesitation, and on his own initiative, he called on four of his comrades to follow him, and leaped forward in the face of a terrific machine gun fire. The act itself attracted the enemy's fire and it was concentrated on his small party, those lying on the ground thus being saved. Corporal Coppins and his companions dashed straight for the machine guns, the four men with him were killed; Corporal Coppins was wounded, despite his wound he reached the hostile machine gun alone, he called on the crews to surrender, they did not comply. He then killed the man operating the first gun and three of the crew – four others immediately surrendered. This brilliant act of bravery was the means of saving many lives in Corporal Coppin's platoon, and enabled it to advance. Although wounded, Coppins advanced with his platoon to the final objective – a distance of 5,000 yards – leaving the line only when it had been made secure and when he was ordered to do so by his Commanding Officer. All this time his wound must have given him great pain as his left ankle was almost disabled by shrapnel.

Another instance of gallantry was shown by Private (Acting Lance-Corporal) A. BRERETON. A line of hostile machine guns opened fire suddenly on his platoon. The men of the platoon were ordered to take cover by their Platoon Commander. They were in an exposed position and it was found that there was no cover available. It immediately became apparent that the platoon would be annihilated unless the fire of the hostile machine guns was

Tanks had by now advanced along the northern edge of BEAUFORT WOOD, and the men were pressing forward by means of the process of infiltration. Hostile Artillery fire had been very severe, and although the best advantage had been taken of all of folds in the ground severe casualties had been unavoidable. This second Wood, which had given so much trouble, had been named HATCHET WOOD by Major T.H. RADDALL, D.S.O. on account of its appearance on the map. During the attack on this wood, many notable instances of valour had occurred. The action of Corporal F.G. COPPINS was one of the most noticeable. Corporal Coppin's Platoon came unexpectedly into the zone of fire of numerous machine guns in HATCHET WOOD. They were unable to advance or retire as they were badly exposed on an open forward slope, and as there was no available cover, the situation required prompt and immediate action. Corporal Coppins at once appreciated the situation. Without a moment's hesitation, and on his own initiative, he called on four of his comrades to follow him, and leaped forward in the face of a terrific machine gun fire. The act itself attracted the enemy's fire and it was concentrated on his small party, those lying on the ground being thus saved. Corporal Coppins and his companions dashed straight for the machine guns, the four men with him were killed; Corporal Coppins was wounded, despite his wound he reached the hostile machine gun alone, he called on the crews to surrender, they did not comply. He then killed the man operating the first gun and three of the crew – four others immediately surrendered. This brilliant act of bravery was the means of saving many lives in Corporal Coppin's platoon, and enabled it to advance. Although wounded, Coppins advanced with his platoon to the final objective – a distance of 5,000 yards – leaving the line only when it had been made secure and when he was ordered to do so by his Commanding Officer. All this time his wound must have given him great pain as his left ankle was almost disabled by shrapnel.

Another instance of gallantry was shown by Private (Acting Lance-Corporal) A. BRERETON. A line of hostile machine guns opened fire suddenly on his Platoon. The men of the platoon were ordered to take cover by their Platoon Commander. They were in an exposed position and it was found that there was no cover available. It immediately became apparent that the platoon would be annihilated unless the fire of the hostile machine guns was subdued without delay. L/Corporal Brereton at once appreciated the critical situation and realized that unless something were done and done at once, his comrades would be killed or wounded to the last man. Of his own free will, and on his own initiative, without a moment's delay, he sprang forward and dashing towards the enemy reached one of the hostile machine gun positions. He shot the man operating the gun, and bayoneted the next man who attempted to operate it, at which nine others surrendered to him. His action was a splendid example of resource and bravery and undoubtedly saved many of his comrades' lives. This act enabled L/Corporal Brereton's platoon to charge the five remaining positions where they killed 15 of the enemy and captured 30 more.

After the capture of HATCHET WOOD, the advance of "A" and "C" Companies became possible. For the next few hundred yards the opposition encountered was considerably less severe. The battalion, however, at this point lost the services of its Commanding Officer, Major T.H. RADDALL, D.S.O. Major Raddall for many years had spent his life in the service of his country. A very able expert in marksmanship and in the use of the machine gun; it was by a bullet from

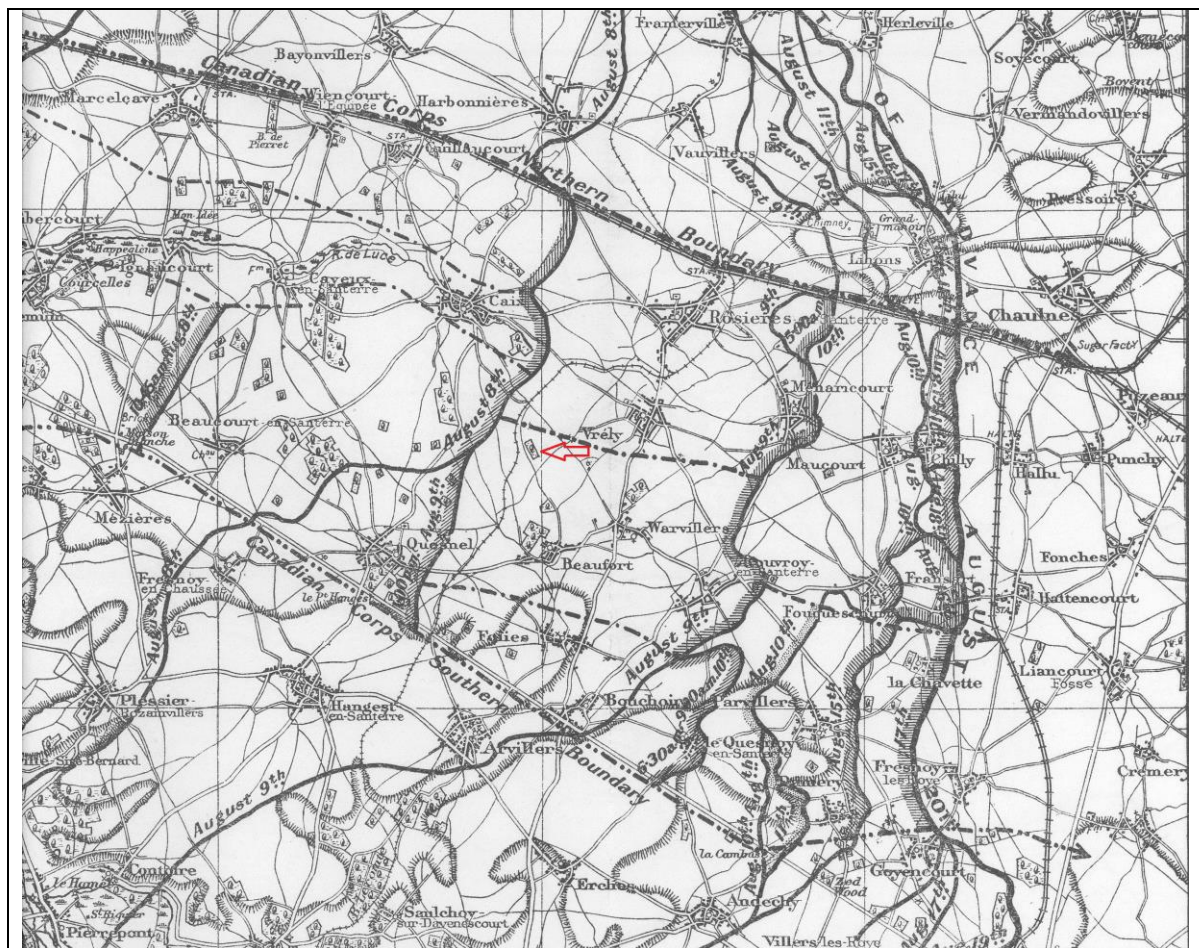
subdued without delay. L/Corporal Brereton at once appreciated the critical situation and realized that unless something were done and done at once, his comrades would be killed or wounded to the last man. Of his own free will, and on his own initiative, without a moment's delay, he sprang forward and dashing towards the enemy reached one of the hostile machine gun positions. He shot the man operating the gun, and bayoneted the man who attempted to operate it, at which nine others surrendered to him. His action was a splendid example of resource and bravery and undoubtedly saved many of his comrades' lives. This act enabled L/Corporal Brereton's platoon to charge the five remaining positions where they killed 15 of the enemy and captured 30 more.

Source:
April 1918 2nd Brigade War Diary⁸
Library and Archives Canada

(Note: Major Raddall who named HATCHET WOOD was killed shortly thereafter by a machine gun bullet through the chest).

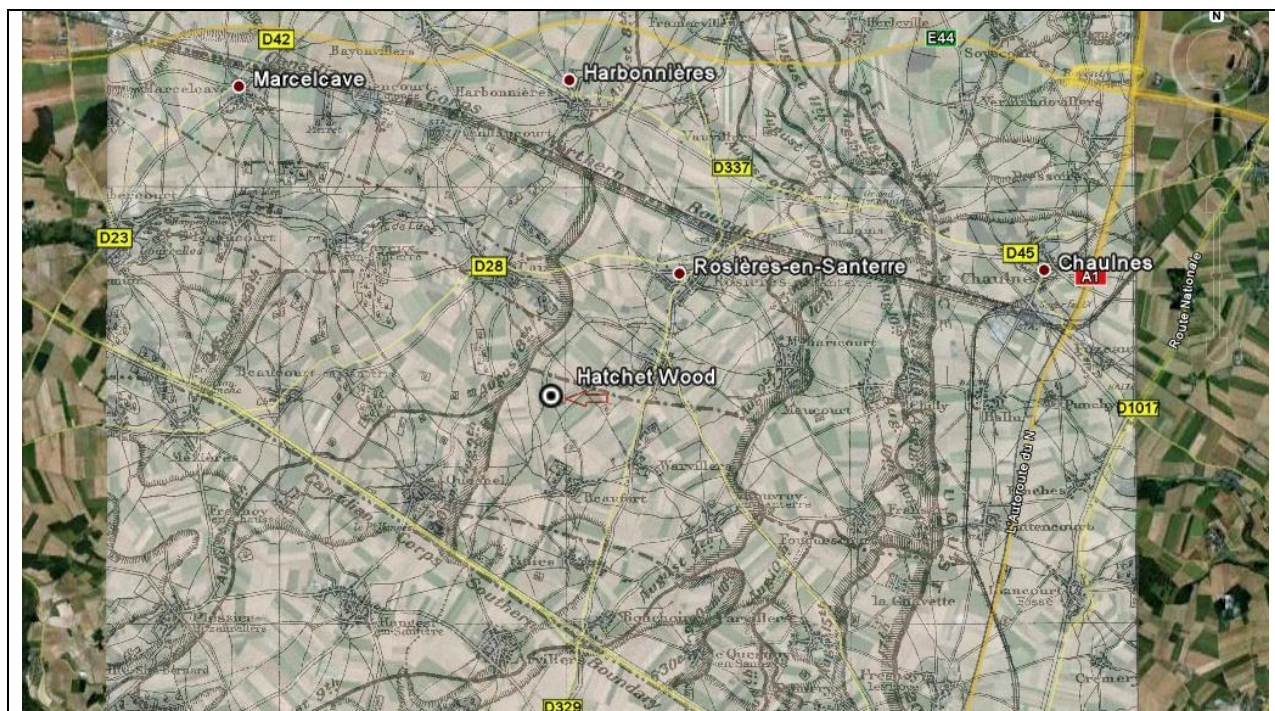
There are numerous on-line and off-line maps that provide a layout as to where the action was happening on August 8th and 9th, 1918. Nicholson ¹ and Livesay ² provide excellent battle summary maps of most of the major events, which can then be compared to the operational “*Trench Maps*” that were produced for specific periods during the Great War. Many of these are now available in private collections as well as on the public collection at the “[McMaster University Lloyd Reeds Map Collection](#)”.

Livesay’s ² map from 1919 shows the relationship of the CEF to the French Corps to the south and the Australian Corps on the north, as well as the front lines as they stood on August 8th and August 9th, 1918. Hatchet Wood is clearly distinguishable in the centre of the map, in the path of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, as previously depicted in the sketch provided by Christie ⁴ for the employment of troops of the 1st Canadian Division.



Livesay 1919 Map: Battle of Amiens (Hatchet Wood marked as )

With circa 2010 computer systems, we can now overlay and align this map on current day satellite images provided by Google Earth. This is an advantage for the *modern day amateur historian* who wants to provide all the pieces for others to learn about and then visit the site of the action. With the Google Earth Overlays, anyone can take the map details (even the map coordinates), enter them into their handheld GPS and go to the site. With the addition of PDA technology such as [Linesman – Great War Digital](#), you can walk the trenches of our ancestors using the same trench maps they used in 1914-1919.



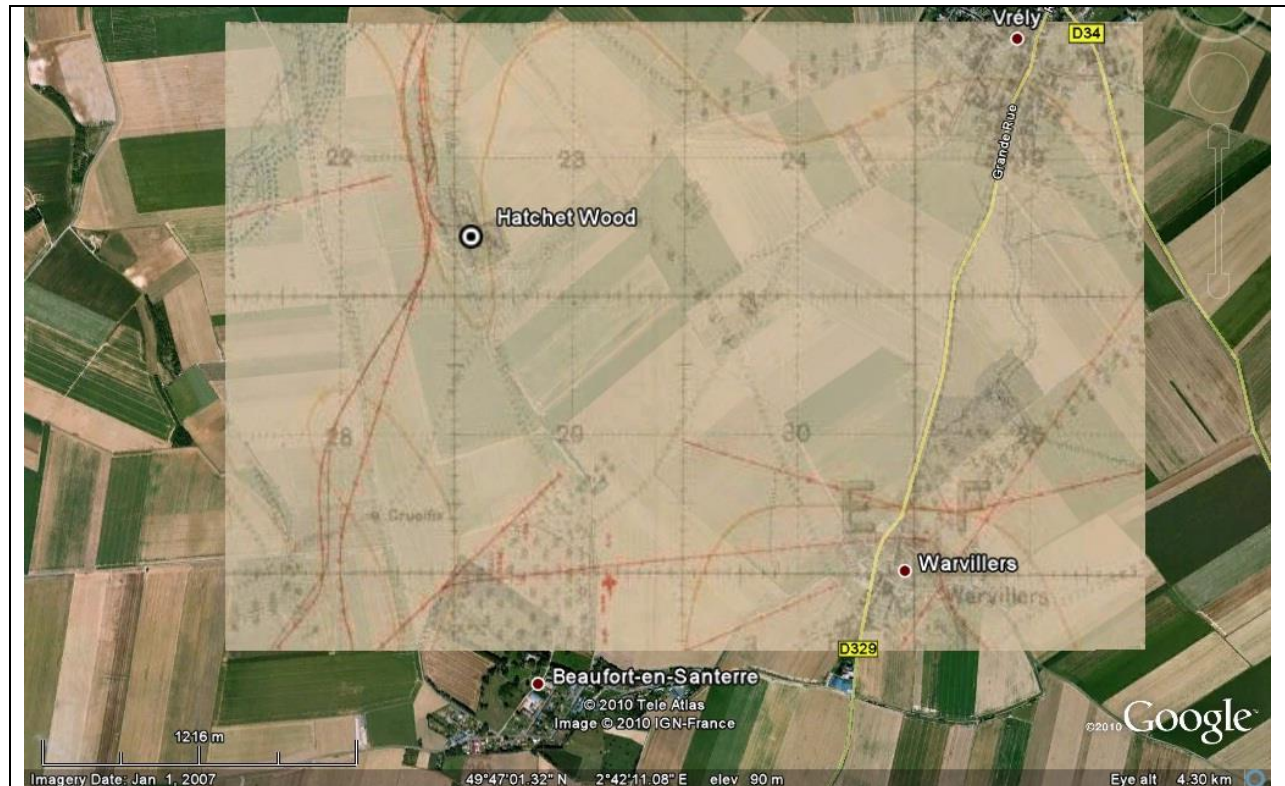
Google Earth Overlay: Battle of Amiens, Laughton 2010⁹

For a more detailed layout of the area of Hatchet Wood, we have to move on to the private trench map collections of other researchers or the collections made available from the Lloyd Reeds Collection at the McMaster University (Hamilton, ON Canada)¹¹. The area of discussion is shown in Trench Map 62d and specifically in the blocks E.23 and E.24.



McMaster University, Lloyd Reeds Collection: Trench Map 62d SE Extract¹¹

These maps are provided primarily for those readers (researchers) that want to be able to pinpoint specific areas where units were active in the *Attack on Hatchet Woods* during the *Battle of Amiens* in August 1918. Most certainly this capability is augmented by those that are providing Battlefield Tours, such as that shown here by the work of Christie ⁴ and the Linesman Project.

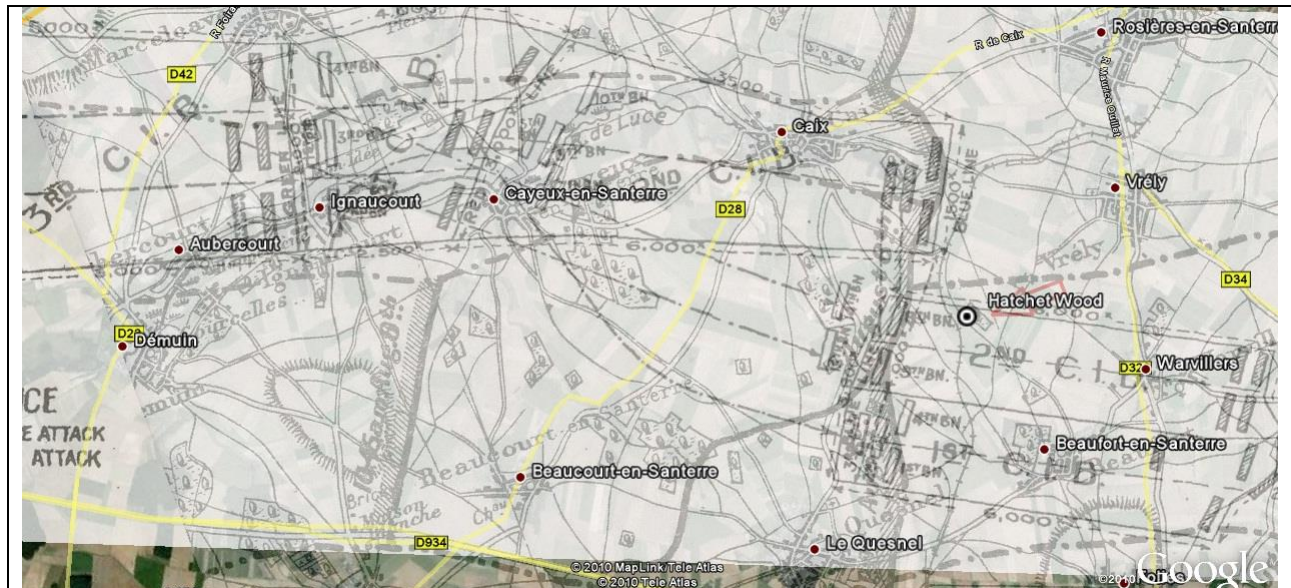


[Google Earth Overlay: Attack on Hatchet Wood, Laughton 2010](#) ⁹

Author's Note: The Lloyd Reeds Collection at McMaster University in Hamilton ON Canada contains digitized copies of a large number of trench maps that cover most of France and Flanders during the Great War. In most cases there are multiple maps for each of the main battle areas, encompassing the battle timeline from 1914 to 1918. The codes and interpretations of the maps follow the standards set in 1914; however some battle specific maps are composites of many maps. Aerial photographs are also provided in the Lloyd Reeds Collection. For details on the interpretation of the Great War Trench Maps, please refer to the [CEFSG Matrix Utility](#) ¹⁰.

To depict the near locations of the relevant brigades and battalions for the start of the Battle of Amiens and the attack on Hatchet Wood, an overlay map has been prepared using the modern day Google Earth technology. In this case, the technology is sometimes more important than the satellite image, as the process can be used to overlay historic maps, with or without the base map.

For this overlay, Nicholson Map 11 for the overall Battle of Amiens was used as an overlay on Google Earth to place all the main fronts and objectives. Once this was established, both the Livesay and Christie maps were placed on top of the Nicholson map, which was subsequently removed. The end result is a map (and [Google Earth Tour](#)) showing the unit placements, particularly the 2nd Infantry Brigade as it made its way to Caix, before turning south to attack Hatchet Wood.



[Overlay of Christie ⁴ and Livesay ² on Google Earth, Laughton 2010 ⁹](#)

As a result of the attack on Hachet Wood as described, two members of the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion were awarded the *Victoria Cross*, for their unselfish efforts to destroy and capture enemy machine gun nests that were holding up the advance of the battalion and annihilating the men.

Amazingly, both of these V.C. winners survived not only the battle but the war. The report on these V.C. winners is taken from the work of Arthur Bishop ¹², as reported in the London Gazette ¹³ and the Legion Magazine ¹⁴.

Corporal Frederick George Coppins, 8th Battalion

From the London Gazette: *Cpl. Coppins, without hesitation, and on his own initiative, called on four men to follow him and he leapt forward in the face of intense machine gun fire. With his comrades he rushed straight for the machine guns.*

Another member of the 8th Bn., Cpl. Fred Coppins was similarly trapped in open ground by German machine-gun fire on Aug. 9. His platoon could neither advance nor retire and there was no place to hide. He called for four volunteers and then led a charge in a hail of enemy bullets. All four volunteers were killed and Coppins was wounded. However, he managed to take out a gunner and three of the crew and then capture four other Germans. His quick, decisive action saved his platoon and earned him the VC.

Coppins received his medal from King George V at Buckingham Palace on Oct. 24, 1918. Following the war he worked as a construction worker in Oakland, Calif. He died March 30, 1963. His funeral service was attended by representatives of The Royal Canadian Legion, the Last Post Fund and Canada's consul general.



F. C. Coppins
#1987
(Legion Magazine)

Corporal Alexander Picton Brereton, 8th Battalion

From the London Gazette: *Cpl. Brereton's action was a splendid example of resource and bravery, and not only undoubtedly saved many of his comrades' lives, but also inspired his platoon to charge and capture the remaining posts.*

On Aug. 9, Alec Brereton's 8th Cdn. Inf. Bn. platoon was caught in open country, exposed to a nest of German machine-guns with no way of finding cover. As man after man fell to enemy fire, the unit was in danger of being wiped out. Acting Corporal Brereton sprang forward alone and assaulted the nearest enemy post, shot the gunner and bayoneted another German trying to man the gun. His quick, startling action so unnerved the enemy that nine of them surrendered to him. Brereton earned the VC by single-handedly saving his unit from annihilation.

Born Nov. 13, 1892, at Oak River, Man., Brereton worked on a farm in Alberta. After the war he acquired 640 acres of farmland at Elnora, Alta. He died June 11, 1976, at Golden Hills Lodge in Three Hills at age 83.



A. P. Brereton
#830651
(Legion Magazine)

A number of Prisoners and War Trophies were taken by the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade during the actions on August 8th and 9th 1918, recorded as "The Attack on the Amiens Defence System". Appendix 15 of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade war diary lists the following for that period: (* *automatic rifles found for the first time*)

Prisoners

Unwounded	1700
Wounded	several hundred uncouncted

Trophies Captured

Machine Guns	190
Field Guns	2
Anti-Tank Gun	1
Automatic Rifles	75*
Horses	15 (10 destroyed)
Wagons and Limbers	50
Rifles, estimated over	5000
Printing Press	1
Gasoline Engines	2
Wire Stretching Machine	1
Telephone Switchboards	7
Telephones	25

Cook ³ reports that in the Battle of Amiens from August 8 to 14, 1918 there were ten Victoria Crosses and 3,000 other decorations awarded to the Canadian Corp. The Corp at a little over 102,000 strong suffered 11,822 casualties, mainly infantry.

References:

1. Nicholson, G. W. L. 1962. [Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919](#). Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, Ottawa, Canada.
2. Livesay, J. F. B. [Canada's Hundred Days – With the Canadian Corps from Amiens to Mons, Aug. 8 to Nov. 11, 1918](#). Thomas Allen, Toronto 1919.
3. Cook, T. 2008. [Shock Troops – Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918, Volume 2](#). Penguin Group, Toronto, Ontario Canada.
4. Christie, N. 1999. [The Canadians at Amiens, August 8th to 16th 1918: A Social History and Battlefield Tour](#). CEF Books, Ottawa, Ontario Canada.
5. Sheffield, G. and Boue, J.(ed). 2005. [Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918](#). The Orion Publishing Group Ltd., London, England.
6. Humphries, M. O. (ed). 2008. [The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie – Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-1933](#). Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.
7. Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1918. [War Diary of the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion](#). Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
8. Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1918. [War Diary of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade](#). Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
9. Laughton, R. V. 2010. [Google Earth Community – Overlay of the Battle of Amiens & The Attack on Hatched Wood in August 1918](#). Milton, Ontario Canada.
10. Laughton, R. V *et al.* 2006-2010. [The Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group MATRIX Project: MAPS UTILITY](#). International On-Line Research Project of CEFSG Members.
11. McMaster University. 2009. [The Lloyd Reeds Collection: WWI Maps and Aerial Photos](#). Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.
12. Bishop, A. 1995, 2008. [True Canadian Victoria Cross Heroes](#). Key Porter Books Limited, Toronto, Ontario Canada. (formerly "Our Bravest and Our Best")
13. The London Gazette. [On-Line Searchable Version](#) .Published by TSO on behalf of Her Majesty's Stationary Office. London UK.
14. Bishop, A. 2005. [On the Offensive In 1918](#): Part 11 of 18: Canada and the Victoria Cross. Legion Magazine, Kanata, Ontario, Canada.

Notes: (updated January 2013)

1. A copy of all the “*Laughton Articles & Essays*” are now available of the Laughton web site at: <http://laughton.ca/index.php/publications/ww1/>
2. For a web based (hyperlinked) version of this particular article, please go to <http://laughton.ca/publications/ww1/pub5.pdf> . That version provides links to the maps, war diaries and other Internet Resources that are used in the article.
3. Additional information, such as larger scale maps and war diary extracts, that was compiled for the Laughton publications are stored on the MediaFire site at this location: <http://tinyurl.com/laughton-publications>
4. Flip-view copies of the Laughton publications are published in electronic PDF format on the ISSUU self-publishing web site.
All articles: <http://issuu.com/cefmatrix/docs>
This publication: <http://issuu.com/cefmatrix/docs/article>
5. An archive of the publication is held by Archive.org at:
<http://archive.org/details/TheAttackOnHatchetWood-BattleOfAmiensAugust1918>
6. This article was first published electronically in December 2010.
7. This specific article was prepared as a result of a request on the [Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group Forum](#) for an article that would tell the story of the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion at Hatchet Wood. The article is to be linked to the story of the WAR TROPHY – a Maxim Machine Gun, captured August 9, 1918 by the 8th Battalion. (Chris Boonzaier: [The Soldier's Burden](#)).
8. Information contained herein may be used by others to enhance the understanding of the roll Canada played in the Great War of 1914-1921 and to ensure that the men and women who served will be remembered for eternity. The use of this publication for commercial gain is strictly prohibited without the author's written permission.
© Laughton Management Corporation & Richard Laughton.

Richard Laughton is the grandson of two Great War Soldiers, each of whom served in the CEF and BEF. They are responsible for his interest in Great War Research. A scientist-engineer by trade, Richard now dedicates most of his research time to the Great War Matrix Project and by helping other researchers “Keep the Flame Alive”.